



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Religious Freedom in Tajikistan for the Human Dimension Committee Meeting

As delivered by Ted Kontek
to the Human Dimension Committee, Vienna
January 16, 2008

Mr. Chairman,

The United States would like to express its concern regarding recent restrictions placed on religious groups in Tajikistan. We have been informed that the Government of Tajikistan decided on October 11th to legally ban the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and separately has suspended for three months the activities of the Ehyo Protestant Church and Abundant Life Christian Center. We believe that these decisions run contrary to Tajikistan's freely undertaken OSCE commitments and that they undermine Tajikistan's efforts to protect human rights, specifically religious freedom.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been lawfully registered in Tajikistan since 1994, Ehyo Protestant Church since 2001, and Abundant Life Christian Center since 2003. Recently, however, the Ministry of Culture's Council Commission found that Jehovah's Witnesses violated Tajikistani law, but that it made this decision without conducting a formal hearing with representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization. Similar procedural shortcomings reportedly occurred with the suspension of the other two groups.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have appealed the ban. We encourage the Government of Tajikistan to repeal the ban and the suspensions, as well as ensure that the consideration of any appeal is conducted in a fair and transparent manner, in accordance with Tajikistani law and customary principles of due process.

The United States is concerned that the ban on activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the suspension of Ehyo Protestant Church and Abundant Life Christian Center reflects a growing trend of Tajikistani Government restrictions on religious practice, including mosque closures, a ban on wearing hijabs in educational institutions, and other restrictions on youth and women to discourage them from practicing their religion.

We are also concerned that the current draft of the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations is out of step with international standards and may further restrict freedom of religion. We encourage the Government of Tajikistan to request technical assistance from the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, so as to ensure the draft upholds Tajikistan's OSCE religious freedom commitments. We also encourage the Government to work with the OSCE Center and participate in roundtables—such as took place in November—to discuss components of this draft legislation with religious organizations, NGOs, and independent policy analysts.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.